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SUBJECT: SN BRUSSELS SUSPENDS OPERATIONS TO RWANDA
INDEFINITELY, ELIMINATING DIRECT ACCESS TO EUROPE

REF: KIGALI 184

This is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. SN Brussels, the only carrier flying directly from Rwanda to Europe, has suspended all flights to Rwanda until further notice. High-level diplomatic discussions regarding the three-day grounding (February 21-24) of an SN Brussels flight by the Rwandan Civil Aviation Authority (RCAA) did not produce a mutually acceptable solution for the Government of Rwanda (GOR) and SN Brussels management. The issue has expanded beyond merely technical concerns over SN Brussels aircrafts to accusations of racism and political motives for the Belgian grounding of a Rwandan cargo carrier (Silverback Cargo Freighters). End Summary.

Grounding of SN Brussels Flight

¶2. (SBU) In a meeting with EconOff on February 28, Director of the Rwandan Civil Aviation Authority (RCAA), Joshua Mbaraga, asserted that SN Brussels aircrafts that operate in and out of Rwanda have been characterized by a series of technical defects that have raised safety concerns for some time. This prompted an unscheduled ramp inspection on SN Brussels aircraft 00-SFM number 463 on February 21, 2006 at 8 pm. The inspection identified several shortfalls which resulted in the grounding of the aircraft the same day.

¶3. (U) RCAA cited the following reasons for the grounding of the flight: (1) lack of life span tags, which indicate expiration dates, on both the captain and the observer seat belts; (2) hydraulic leak traces on the left inner slats, indicating a potential control mechanism failure; (3) lack of compliance with Airworthiness Directives (ADs). (According to the RCAA, the last updates in the AD log were made in August 2005); and (4) fuel leakage on the left engine.

¶4. (SBU) SN Brussels flight 463, originally scheduled to depart February 21, was authorized to leave Kigali airport on Friday, February 24. While no further mechanical work was done on the plane since the February 21 RCAA inspection, SN Brussels clarified issues of technical requirements, such as the seat belt expiration dates, to the satisfaction of RCAA inspectors. Mbaraga told EconOff that while the technical shortcomings of the detained SN Brussels aircraft

were nominally addressed, the only reason the flight was authorized to depart was because of political pressure from Belgium, including three separate calls from Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht to Rwandan Foreign Affairs Minister Charles Murigande.

Links to Silverback Cargo Freighters (SCF)

¶5. (SBU) An aircraft, 9XR-SC, belonging to a private Rwandan company, Silverback Cargo Freighters (SCF), has been grounded at Zaventem Airport in Belgium since August 19, 2005. The Belgian Civil Aviation Authority (BCAA) asserted that the aircraft was deficient in several technical areas. Officials at SCF said they believe they have addressed each of the shortcomings, yet they have not been authorized even a ferry permit to transit to a maintenance facility. In fact, in a February 24 letter to the European Commission, Innocent Mupenzi, Director General of SCF, complained that each time SCF addressed a list of concerns, it was given another set of reasons for the aircraft's detention in Belgium. In addition to lost revenue, Silverback is accruing parking charges of 950 Euros per day at the Belgian airport.

¶6. (U) In December 2005, the European Union unanimously agreed to create a blacklist of airlines that would not be allowed to operate within the European Union. Belgium proposed that Silverback Cargo Freighters be included on that list, which would effectively ban their operations in Europe. The European Union has invited each of the airlines (including SCF) on the proposed non-public blacklist, to present their case for exclusion from the list. The European Commission delivered the announcement and invitation to Silverback Cargo Freighters on Tuesday,

February 21, the same day the RCAA grounded the SN Brussels flight.

¶7. (SBU) According to Silverback representatives, their aircrafts have been flying to the United Kingdom, Holland, and Dubai with no incident and are insured by Lloyds of London, a reputable insurance company known for its stringent security and safety requirements. In fact, all SCF flights to Brussels, from its initial flight on January 26, 2005, to its most recent flight on August 19, 2005, were incident-free. Mupenzi added that SCF was only given rights to operate in Belgium after the Belgian Embassy in Kigali intervened on its behalf.

¶8. (SBU) Mbaraga denied that the SN Brussels flight 463 grounding was a retaliatory act, and maintained that it was a case of serious maintenance irregularities on the part of SN Brussels. In fact, Mbaraga complained that the SN Brussels management had not acted on prior RCAA warnings.

Souring of Belgian-Rwandan relations

¶9. (SBU) SN Brussels Country Manager, Serge DeWachter, told EconOff that he was called into the Rwandan Immigration Office on Wednesday, February 22, the day after flight 463 was grounded, and was warned about the potential revocation of his Rwandan visa.

¶10. (SBU) The February 28 issue of The New Times accused SN Brussels of racism in its treatment of affected passengers. The article, and subsequent radio and television broadcasts, criticized the airline for offering transit facilitation services to white passengers continuing to Rwanda, while Rwandan and Burundi passengers were stranded in Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi until Sunday. These allegations were reiterated by both the Rwandan Minister of Transportation and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. SN Brussels denied the allegations, saying that all passengers arranged their own onward travel, but acknowledged that it could have done more to assist all passengers. Embassy received no reports to substantiate

these allegations, and the Belgian Embassy, which spoke with some of the Rwandan and Burundi passengers, found no evidence of racism or differential treatment.

¶11. (SBU) Three high-level executives from SN Brussels arrived on March 1 to meet with Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, Evariste Bizimana, and RCAA Director Mbaraga. The discussions lasted two days, resulting in verbal assurances from the Belgians to facilitate resolution of the Silverback affair and to resume SN Brussels operations in Rwanda. The SN Brussels executives returned to Belgium on March 2 with the understanding that full and normal operations had resumed, and that the scheduled Saturday flight would arrive in Kigali on March 4. However, Minister Bizimana, on March 3, presented SN Brussels Country Manager DeWachter written minutes of their meeting to sign which were in direct contradiction to the minutes taken by SN Brussels officials. The Rwandan-drafted minutes included SN Brussels accepting the safety and security shortcomings of flight 463 and an apology for the discriminatory treatment of the African passengers. SN Brussels representatives refused to sign those minutes, and both sides agreed to an indefinite suspension of operations in Rwanda.

¶12. (U) On February 24, Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Foreign Minister De Gucht issued an official press release, warning that this controversy will have a "noxious effect on cooperation between the two countries" and that they would inform international donors and partners of the problems they are facing.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: The loss of SN Brussels' twice-a-week service to Kigali is significant both administratively and diplomatically. Almost all Embassy staff and visitors travel on this direct route from Europe, which is also a code-share with American Airlines. Last week, a Public Affairs-sponsored training program was cancelled, as the trainers were stuck in Belgium and were not able to complete their travel to Rwanda. Moreover, the Mission's unclassified pouch is delivered via SN Brussels. While SN

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Brussels is not a national airline, the GOR appears to be treating the airline as such. Prolonged impasse on this

increasingly contentious issue could adversely impact Rwandan-Belgian relations, both diplomatically and in terms of economic development.

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